

ASTONISHING WORK OF ALLIED SECRET SOCIETY IN BELGIUM

How Thousands of British Prisoners Were Freed By Men,
Women and Children Who Lived in
Occupied Districts.

The whole world has heard of happy escapees of Allied prisoners from the Rhine, but few know anything of the agency by which many of these escapes were aided. It was the work of one of the most amazing secret societies in the world, a society without a name, presided over by a Scot, Frederick Maxwell, or name, and among its members were hundreds of men and women, and even children, in the occupied regions of France and Belgium. In this series Mr. Maxwell tells for the first time the story of the work.

(By Frederick Maxwell.)
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Instantaneous Three.
There is, however, no doubt of the truth of his story. I have had it confirmed by responsible British authorities who were in a position to know what the Captain was doing during the two years or so he was a prisoner and a fugitive in Germany. This method of getting spies into Germany was more freely resorted to by the French than by the British or Belgians, and they certainly found it successful enough to be kept up. We were often warned of the inclusion of spies in parties of prisoners, and when rescuees were successful we did not object to the men going back to the Germans.

Rescuees in the extreme were the measures taken by the Germans during the period extending from February of last year down to the signing of the armistice. The enemy realized then that the years of suffering borne patiently by the Belgians were bearing fruit, and that these people were quietly preparing for the day when their revenge would come as the German hordes on Belgium were released. It was in the hope of preventing this movement by establishing a reserve force of terror throughout the occupied territory that the Germans took the course they did.

When it was decided to evacuate occupied towns or villages, the order was given that the residents were not to appear in the streets until they had secured permission from the German authorities, and as no food was available for them this meant that the people were left to starve.

In the same way, when German troops were being massed in Belgium before the attack of March 21st, the civilians were ordered on February 22nd to remain in the houses during certain periods of the day—periods selected for the purpose of the rescue. All of the soldiers sent through Brussels were new men, who had been in garrison in different parts of Germany, with the exception of a few who were made up of men who had been called back to the army after being discharged in 1918. The question of wounds sustained earlier in the war.

I talked very freely with the German soldiers at that time, for though I had many times been saved when helping Allied prisoners to escape, my Belgian nationality was never questioned, and no one identified me with the man whose association with escapees was known to the Germans. I found that the Germans were very dependent about the outlook.

The man said to me, "It is folly. We are being sent to death. The Allies are too strong for us. We cannot hope to prevail."

German officers at that time were hardly less pessimistic, but some of them counted on catching the British machine. One officer of the German Army with whom I talked when he came to me in Brussels in March of last year about the bittering of French troops was a Major W., an Alsatian, and a relative of a French officer.

The Major was typically German, and had the fixed idea that his relative had brought disgrace on the name by siding against Germany. When I asked him to sign the German world was still of the war the Major replied—

"Yes, but it will soon end. The British are going to be surprised and beaten badly. They can deal with the degenerate French. As for the Americans, they don't count. The British are certain that the talk of an offensive from our side is bluff, and they will be bluffed. They are not taking precautions."

That was typical of the thought of the German officers at that time, and I fancy that the Germans must have tried at that time to make the British really believe that their bluff of an offensive was bluff in order to fall the British and French into false security.

German Nerves.
German nerves as the Allies should learn of what was going on behind the lines became more tense every day, and by the summer of last year the German authorities suffered very badly from nerves. It was known or suspected that aircraft were being trained intelligence officers, and it was known also that escapees were taking back very valuable information. Therefore, the guards met instructions that they were to fire at once on any prisoners attempting to escape in the streets of Brussels, even though it was well known that crowds of innocent people were in the streets to see these prisoners pass through. The German reply to this point was that people had no right to be in the streets and that, if they appeared there, they must take the consequences.

Regulations relating to aircraft became more stringent, and German aeroplanes were required to answer signals from the anti-aircraft gun stations around Brussels. Aeroplanes passing over the city were fired on unless they observed the instructions issued to them, and it was a common occurrence to find the guns suddenly open fire on apparently innocent aeroplanes overhead. Showers of shrapnel fell in the streets on such occasions, and many innocent passers-by were badly injured. The Germans gave them scant sympathy, saying that if they wished to escape such dangers they should either remain indoors or appeal to the British and French to stop sending spies by aeroplane.

Outside Brussels, as I have already stated, the practice was not only to fire on prisoners attempting to escape, but where rescue was suspected to kill the prisoners rather than let

them fall into the hands of the rescuees. Towards the end of March, when everything appeared to be chaotic on the British front, and the Germans were specially desirous that nothing should leak out, strongly increased guards were provided for the escort of prisoners, and on the slightest pretext shots were fired into the ranks of prisoners.

We had received information that the British Headquarters were eager to obtain first-hand information of what had happened on the Arras-Bapaume Road, and also with regard to the state of German communications beyond that point. It was suggested that if we could effect the release some of the men and a trained officer, this information might be forthcoming. Some men of the 51st Division were paraded through the streets of Brussels on the 28th of March, the Germans giving out that these were the sole survivors of the famous division, a story that may have been intended to lift the spirits of the new troops by letting them believe that this terrible, black-listed division was no longer to be feared, or perhaps was designed to impress the Belgian civilian population.

Shot in Cold Blood.
We were early on the move on the chance of effecting a rescue, but in Brussels itself there was absolutely no chance of communicating with the prisoners, so strictly were they guarded.

Near the Hotel de Ville a Belgian had held out a bunch of flowers to a group of men, most of whom were wounded. One of the soldiers stepped forward to receive the flowers, a German struck him with the butt end of his rifle, and the poor fellow was knocked down. Two of his comrades made an angry protest. The German raised his rifle and fired in quick succession, killing one of the Scots and wounding the other. Soldiers and civilians alike were horrified by this cold-blooded attack on unarmed men, and they made protests, but the only answer they got was to be attacked by the soldiers with their bayonets. The German official explanation of this affair was that the prisoners were conspiring to escape with the aid of the Belgians.

It was not until the party had got clear of the city that it was thought wise to attempt a rescue. We had spent the previous year preparing for an uprising of the Belgian people against their tyrants, and some excellent companies of sharpshooters or franc-tireurs had been formed to carry on guerrilla warfare against the Germans once they began their homeward trek. By way of keeping ourselves in training, we made frequent attacks on the German line of communications, cutting up weak detachments, destroying stores, and rescuing prisoners. Such an enterprise as we had now embarked on was just to our liking, and none liked it better than the women who belonged to our band.

We kept close to the Germans and their prisoners from the moment of their departure from the city until they selected their billets for the night. The German guards were put in houses at a hamlet on the main road, and the prisoners were supplied with waterproof sheets and ordered to look out for themselves. Our plan was to attack suddenly in the night, kill as many of the Germans as we could, release as many prisoners as were willing to take the risk of flight, and then disband as quickly as we could before the inevitable German reinforcements arrived on the scene.

Successful Attack.
It was about three in the morning when I deemed it wise to order the attack, which proved entirely successful. The Germans were caught at a disadvantage, and very few of them got away.

The whole of the prisoners, numbering one hundred and eight of French and British nationality, were released and broken up into different Highland regiments that were unlikely enough to fall in the attempt to get through the German lines.

There was an officer in the party who was able to make a report on the state of the transport behind the German front line that gave the Allied commanders all they wanted to know in time for the measures they proposed to take to break the German communications and their weakest point by means of vigorous attacks from the air.

Some of these parties of British prisoners failed in their efforts to get through the German lines, and were severely dealt with when they fell into German hands once more. One party we encountered again, and succeeded in rescuing it once more, this time with better luck. There was a party of about thirty men, and different Highland regiments that were unlikely enough to fall in the attempt to get through the German lines.

The names of these men were Cooney, Bury, Hill, Seton, Bruce, Gilmore, Davidson, and Glover. They set out with two Belgians who had been working with us for some time, and I believe succeeded in reaching the neighborhood of Hazeu, where they were caught in the net of crossing over to the British lines. Fire was opened on them, and several of the party were killed outright. The survivors took shelter in a shell hole, where they remained in water up to the knees during the night, exposed to the terrors of one of the heaviest artillery bombardments experienced on that part of the front.

In the morning, when the party set out once more, dodging from shell hole to shell hole, the Germans discharged poison gas across the ground, and all were asphyxiated, with the exception of one of the Belgians, who was afterwards brought into the German lines and nursed back to life, when he was put on trial at Brussels for plotting with others to release Allied prisoners who were employed as spies on the Germans.

Sentenced to Death.
All that could be done by way of defence of the poor fellow was done, but it proved unavailing. He was sentenced to death, and in the German Cavalry Barracks the sentence was carried out the next morning. I was greatly distressed on hearing the

fate that awaited this poor fellow, but it was not found possible to aid him in any way, so strongly was he guarded. I am told that he met his end bravely, another martyr to the cause of Belgian freedom.

I heard later that no could have got away during the attack had it not been that he went back to see what assistance he could render to Gilmore, one of the party who was believed to be alive. He arrived in time to find Gilmore breathing his last, and while he was trying to console the dying man, who was in great agony, the Germans released more gas, which so affected the Belgian that he could not get away until the German patrol arrived and arrested him.

When the Germans began their evacuation of Northern France and Belgium it was decided that we could in all probability render more valuable aid in that region than in Belgium itself, so in small parties we moved towards Lille and Cambrai. The Germans had begun the evacuation of the latter town when I arrived in it, but I found that the British prisoners who had been held up owing to the congestion of the German line of communications were still there.

My credentials as a member of the Committee for the Relief of French and Belgian Civilians were good enough to avoid those my presence in the town, and I had no difficulty in gaining admission. Indeed, the German Commander seemed rather glad to see me, because he got the impression that I had come in response to a hint from German headquarters to relieve him of the responsibility for the feeding of these civilians. I said nothing to enlighten him as to my real mission, but settled quietly down as though I had really come on the errand attributed to me.

On the last day of the German occupation the British prisoners, to the number of nearly a thousand, were moved out under escort with a number of French and German nurses. I did not like the thought of all these men going away with the information they could give to the Allied commanders, but I did not see how it was possible to effect their rescue under the conditions which prevailed.

I decided that it would be best to keep an eye on the movements of these prisoners, and I learned from one of the nurses that the prisoners intended to halt five miles out of the town that night, and resume the journey in the morning.

Unpleasant Experience.
Late last night British troops entered the town, and I told the Commander what I knew about the prisoners. He agreed that it was worth while attempting to get them back, and asked if I would act as guide to the spot where they were to camp for the night. I said that I would, but was somewhat surprised to find that he had some doubts about my bona-fides, for he made me march at the head of his troops with two soldiers on either side with revolvers ready to end my days should I show signs of treachery.

It was not a very pleasant experience for me, conscious as I was of my own good faith, and when our party was halted, I was suddenly surrounded by soldiers on either side of the road I thought they were going to kill me without waiting to see whether the attack had any connection with me or not. Fortunately the very thought of the fate that awaited me if I failed to guide the cavalry across the fields to another road by which they could reach the halting place of the convoy of prisoners.

I made good my promise, and we arrived at the encampment to find the Germans in confusion, and only too glad to be taken prisoners. We managed to get the whole of the prisoners back into the town during the day though in the last stage of the operation the Germans suddenly became aggressive, and followed us up in force, pressing close into the town itself as though they were bent on retaking it.

This haul of released prisoners was a lucky one for us, because among the prisoners were discovered two French intelligence officers who had been sent into the town on the side of the Germans and had placed mines to cause havoc among the occupying troops. It was found that one of the mines most dangerously mined was that selected by the British officer for billeting his men, and had it not been for the information given by these daring French officers the whole of the British soldiers occupying the place that night might have been blown up. Time has been fixed to explode about three o'clock in the morning. There was only one hour in which to remove these mines, but they were safely disposed of.

(From the International News Service, Inc., Boston, Mass.)

(To Be Continued.)

WAR ORATORY NEEDS CENSORING.

Accuracy and war oratory are very often at odds, states The Home Secretary, the ex-soldier's magazine, conducted by the former editorial council of The Star and Stripes.

Representative James H. May, of Utah, discouraging in Congress, gave the following graphic picture of what did not happen at Chateau-Thierry: "At this juncture, the Second Division, including the famous Marines, were thrown into the breach, and the heroic manner in which they performed was the wonder of the campaign. They declined to retreat, although advised by French officers to do so; instead they met the German Guards in the open, as they advanced with bands playing, in regular column formation, goose-stepping toward the city."

The ex-soldier's magazine comments on the story picture drawn by the Utah congressman as follows: "There are only seven things wrong with Congressman May's statement. Two decisions were not the Second Division were thrown into line, the French never advised them to retreat, the enemy troops they met just then were not of the Prussian Guard, and the Germans did not advance with bands playing nor in column formation, nor goosestepping, and they were not headed for any city in particular."

It is never possible to clean out a winter stock except by a special drive at this season. These are times when the merchants find it necessary to carry as small stocks as possible. Goods run to money very fast. If they carry over considerable stocks, they will have a great many dollars locked up in them, on which they must pay high rates of interest.

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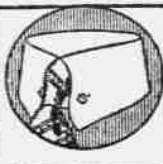
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